

# Charter Schools Propping Up the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Charter schools are four times more likely to suspend black students than their white peers.



A new study shows black students at charter schools are more likely to be suspended than their white peers.

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Charter schools suspend students at a much higher rate than non-charter schools, some of which have suspension rates north of 70 percent. But a disproportionate amount of those suspensions fall on black students, who are four times more likely to be suspended than white students, and students with disabilities, who are twice as likely to be suspended as their non-disabled peers.

Those are just some of the inequities highlighted in a blistering new [analysis](#) from researchers at the [Center for Civil Rights Remedies](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Notably, the data was from the 2011-2012 school year, when every one of the country's 95,000 public

schools, including charters, was required to report its discipline data.



The report, which is the first comprehensive description of the use of suspensions by charter schools, covers 5,250 schools and focuses on out-of-school suspensions at elementary and secondary schools.

Specifically, it examined the extent to which charter schools suspend children of color and children with disabilities at excessive and disparate rates.

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Among the many findings of the 36-page report: More than 500 charter schools suspended black students at a rate that was at least 10 percentage points higher than the rate for white students. And moreover, 1,093 charter schools suspended students with disabilities at a rate that was 10 or more percentage points higher than for

students without disabilities.

The most alarming finding, the research points out, is that 235 charter schools suspended more than 50 percent of their enrolled students with disabilities.

In addition, while racial disparities in suspension rates between black students and white students were significant at both the elementary and secondary level, the rate exploded during secondary school, jumping from a 6.4 percent disciplinary gap to a 16.4 percent gap.

It's been well documented that the [frequent use of suspensions](#), among many other things, contributes to chronic absenteeism, is correlated with [lower achievement](#), and predicts lower graduation rates, heightened risk for [grade retention](#), and delinquent behavior that often leads to the juvenile justice system.

The host of findings, the researchers wrote, suggests that the excessive suspension rates are contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and that at least some charter schools are likely violating the civil rights of students.

Other important findings include:

374 charter schools suspended 25 percent of their enrolled student body at least once.

Nearly half of all black secondary charter school students attended one of the 270 schools that was hyper-segregated (meaning at least 80 percent of the student body was black) and where the aggregate black suspension rate was 25 percent.

At 484 charter schools, the suspension rate for students with disabilities was 20 percentage points higher than for those without disabilities.

To be sure, the report wasn't all bad news: Charter schools with lower suspension rates outnumbered those with high suspension rates.

"One can reasonably infer that, like non-charter schools, there are likely many effective charter schools that reserve suspension as a measure of last resort," the researchers wrote.

And indeed, the suspension rates for charter schools mirror those of non-charter schools, something the researchers also analyzed in their report.

During the 2011-2012 school year, the average suspension rate for all charter schools combined was 7.8 percent, compared to 6.7 percent for all non-charter schools.

However, taking into account that there are fewer charter schools than public schools nationally, the charter school suspension rate was 16 percent higher than the non-charter school suspension rate, according to the report.

One finding in particular left the researchers suspicious: More than 17 percent of all secondary-level charter schools suspended no students, they found, whereas for non-charters, just over 8 percent of secondary schools suspended zero students.

"This raises questions about whether charter schools may be violating civil rights law by not reporting the data on whom they exclude from school on disciplinary grounds," the researchers wrote.

The report comes at a time of heightened scrutiny of disciplinary decisions in the charter sector, especially the high-achieving urban charters.

The issue garnered national attention last month when the New York Times [published a story](#) about a teacher berating a student for not correctly answering a math question at one of [Success Academy's](#) charter schools in Brooklyn.



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The charter organization, which has more than 30 schools throughout New York City, is known for its students' high achievement on tests – something the researchers said may sometimes cause people to overlook disciplinary injustices.

Case in point: In zeroing in on Massachusetts, the researchers found that Roxbury Preparatory Academy – a school that's been praised for its students' academic performance and one that was co-founded by



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Secretary of Education John King – boasted a suspension rate of 40 percent, the 12<sup>th</sup> highest-suspending school in the state.

“While we make no assumptions about Secretary King’s position on charters that favor harsh disciplinary approaches, the school’s strong reputation does raise concerns that extraordinarily high suspension rates may be overlooked when charter schools, like Roxbury Prep, are regarded as ‘high performing,’” the researchers wrote.

Many successful charter school models, including Success Academy, Achievement First, Kipp Academy and others, have embraced the zero-tolerance and no-excuses types of school discipline. Its leaders say is essential to ensuring success for the types of students they serve – students who typically live in economically devastated communities, who come to school hungry, who are being raised by a single parent or by their grandparents, and who have no structure in their lives outside school.

The researchers recommend that such policies be given a hard look in the coming years and that schools that use harsh disciplinary practices seek out alternatives.